

Falconry

BY

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(With two plates)

The art and practice of falconry has been described in many treatises in different languages but very few people know anything about it. There has always been considerable controversy regarding its origin, though there is historical evidence that it has been in existence from *c.* 1200 B.C. Falconry probably originated in Central Asia from whence it spread to Persia and India. The Arabs learned it from the Persians, and it was brought to Europe by the returning Crusaders, who undoubtedly learnt the art from the Arabs.

In the beginning, falconry was perhaps primarily a means of providing man his daily food; today it survives as an unparalleled sport which demands of its devotees, great skill, endurance, and patience.

In India, at one time the stronghold of falconry, its science and practice is now rapidly declining. In my opinion, different causes have contributed towards its downfall. The shotgun is mainly responsible for accelerating the disappearance of this noble sport. There used to be a time when the hawk market of Amritsar would, in the months of October and November, offer for sale numerous hawks and falcons of different kinds. The clientele were the representatives of all the sporting Princes of the country, who vied with one another for some really good hawk or falcon. Today the number of hawk enthusiasts in the country could be counted on the fingers of one hand and the hawk market of Amritsar has ceased to exist. The aspiring falconer finds it difficult to get hawks. Bird catchers have absolutely no idea how to catch hawks or, how to handle them after capture. As a result hawks procured from such sources generally die within a few days of their capture. As is obvious, mishandling and bad feeding are entirely responsible. Since falconry is no longer a lucrative business, professional falconers have ceased to function. I prefer to trap my own hawks.

Though not much in vogue, there exist excellent possibilities for the revival of this sport of kings. The main point to remember in its pursuit is the choice of bird and this is directly related to the type of country one lives in, as well as to the kind of game available. Falcons are at their best in open and flat country where the quarry is obliged to fly long distances before gaining the shelter of bushes. In places where there are many trees and thick bushes growing at short intervals, the "Accipiter" hawks are

in their element. In such terrain a bird capable of short determined dashes alone is useful. One has also to consider the game available in terms of speed and weight. In the case of hawks and of falcons a wide range of birds, capable of hunting heavy and light game, is to be found. One should not expect a small hawk to do the work of the larger ones, or the heavier birds to have the dash and manoeuvrability of the smaller predators.

I have always had a great passion for training eagles and, even today, have with me a pair of fully trained hunting eagles. Hunting with eagles is an incomparable sport.

The Sparrow-Hawk (*Accipiter nisus*) if trained and handled properly would be an ideal beginner's hawk. These birds may be found in great abundance along the foothills of the Himalayas. They have courage and speed, and will readily tackle birds heavier than themselves. Their only weak point happens to be their delicate constitution which calls for much attention and careful handling. This, a beginner may be unable to give, hence I would suggest the Shikra Sparrow-Hawk (*Accipiter badius*) as an alternative. Though slightly smaller in size, this hawk will stand a lot of mishandling at the hands of inexperienced falconers without showing any signs of loss of condition. A lusty hawk, if properly trained to hunt, it will perform as efficiently as its bigger brother the Sparrow-Hawk (*Accipiter nisus*). The Shikra is, of course, a lot slower but this can be overcome to some extent by holding the bird in the palm of your hand and literally throwing it at the quarry. This form of casting is intended to give the hawk added impetus. Such liberties are not possible with the more sensitive Sparrow-Hawk. The Goshawk (*Accipiter gentilis*) is the best amongst hawks of all kinds. It is an extremely shy bird, very sensitive, and quite difficult to train. Once trained, however, it is unsurpassed for close quarter hunting. A falconer who does not consider himself an expert should give this bird a wide berth.

Broadly speaking all hawks receive the same sort of training. They are cast from the fist at game and, if unsuccessful, are called back to the fist, in which is firmly held a piece of meat. A hawk must never be given a chance to soar. Once a hawk starts soaring no amount of calling is ever going to bring it back to the owner's fist. When it ultimately decides to return to earth, it is going to be a good many miles away from the place from which it originally took off.

A falcon on the other hand receives a totally different sort of training. In this case the higher it soars and the longer it keeps soaring, the better will it be appreciated. Falcons are trained to wait at considerable heights, till game is flushed from cover. Once game is forced to come out in the open, the attending falcon immediately stoops at it from above, where it had kept watch. Given proper conditions, the chances are that the

quarry will be struck dead before it has been able to gain the sanctuary of the next lot of bushes and cover. Falcons are not called to the fist but to the lure, which is merely a weighted leather bag about the size of the human fist. Attached to it are the wing feathers of a pigeon; also tied to one end is a stout cord some twelve feet in length. This the falconer swings over his head at the same time calling out aloud to attract the falcon's attention. After swinging the lure a couple of times he lets it drop on the ground. It is then slowly retrieved, and the swinging operation repeated till the falcon decides to fly down to it.

Eagles are trained to jump to the fist. They are also trained to fly to the lure when necessary. To give a detailed description of the various methods of training of the different hawks and falcons would be quite beyond the scope of an article of this kind. As a matter of fact many books have been written on the subject. However, unless there is at all times a guide at the beginner's elbow, no amount of written literature is ever going to help a raw hand with his first hawk; hence the necessity of falconers' clubs. Membership of such clubs would entitle the beginner to free advice and demonstrations.

The most important thing for a falconer to know, is the difference between hawks and falcons. To the experienced eye, this is easy and provided he makes it a point to remember, even the inexperienced novice can easily tell one from the other. All hawks have yellow eyes and all falcons have black eyes. True eagles can always be identified by their feathered legs.

There are many kinds of falcons. The smallest being the Red-headed Merlin or turumti (*Falco chicquera*). A pretty bird, it has some peculiarities that are not present in other falcons, barring the Gyrfalcon (*Falco rusticolus*). The similarity lies in the formation of the primary feathers in relation to the tail feathers. It will be noticed that in the case of the Merlin and the Gyrfalcon the tips of the primary feathers fall short of the end of the tail feathers by some inches. Another peculiarity is that merlins do not soar. I have trained and hunted with dozens of these stout-hearted birds, but so far, I have yet to come across a merlin, that will soar in the manner of other falcons. This is the only case where a falcon departs from convention and must in consequence, be treated like a hawk. In this case the lure would be an unnecessary appendage; this is the main reason why merlins are trained to fly to the fist of the falconer, a line of training not dissimilar to the one given to hawks in general. A merlin may chase game and, in doing so, rise up in spirals, but this is not real soaring.

A notch is present on the beak of all falcons. Nature has provided this notch so that the falcon, after wedging the neck of its prey between it and the lower mandible, is able with a sharp twist to break it. Those

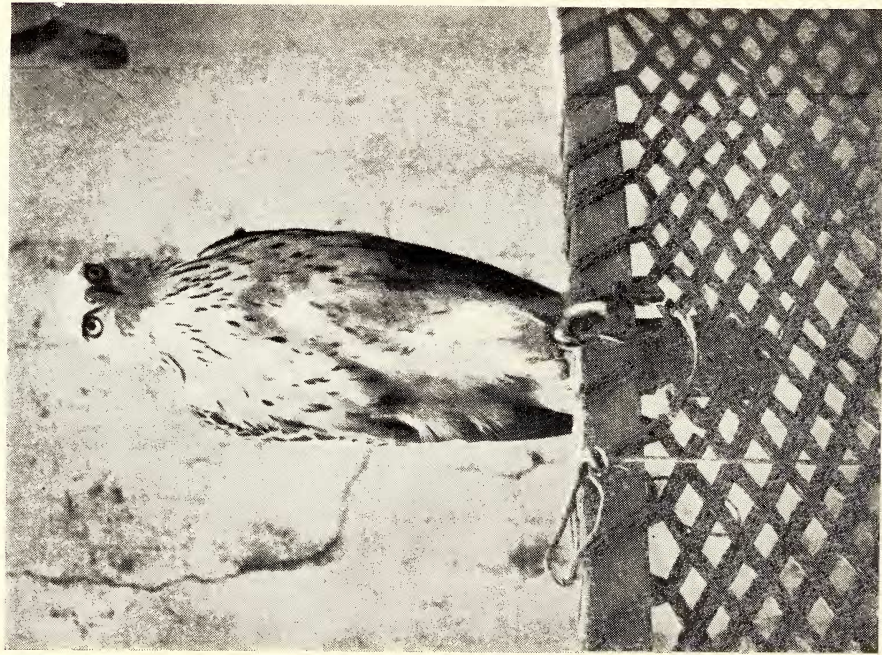
Osman: Falconry



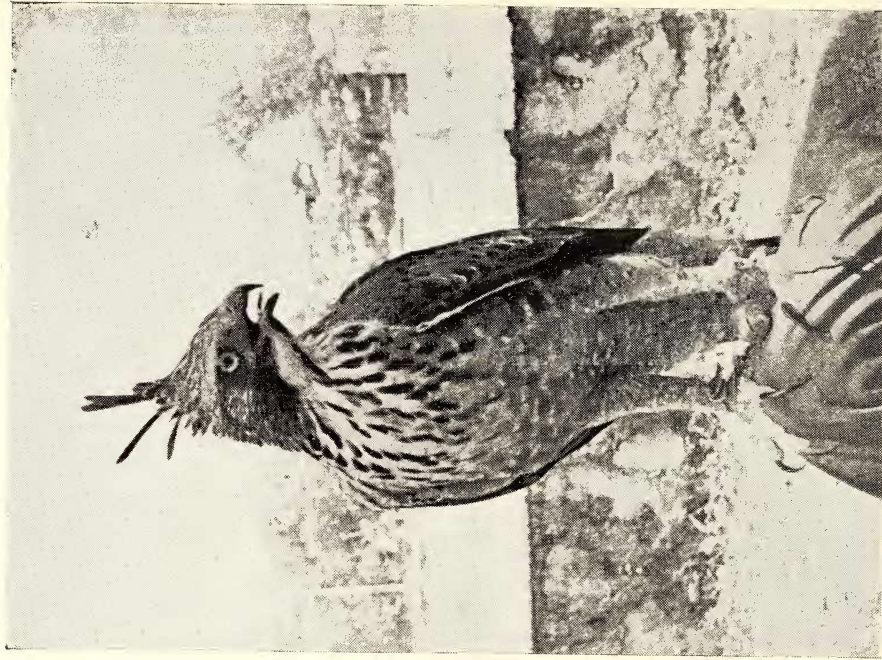
*Above: Shahin Falcon (*Falco peregrinus peregrinator*), Tiercel.*

*Below: Hodgson's Hawk-Eagle (*Spizaetus nipalensis*), on quarry.*

(Photos: Author)



Crested Hawk-Eagle (*Spizaetus cirrhatus*)



Hodgson's Hawk-Eagle (*Spirzaetus nipalensis*)